

Reinforcement Learning 1

MDPs, policies, values, TD learning, and Q-learning

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Introduction

Plan for these lectures

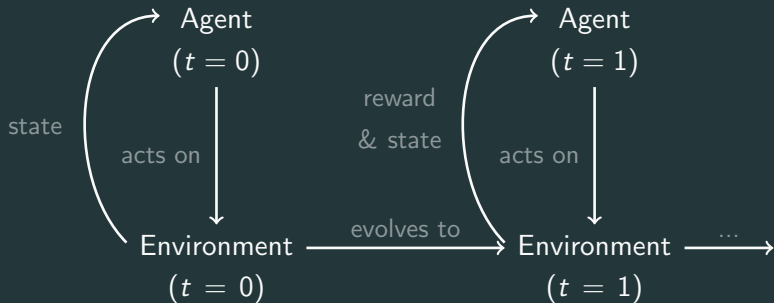
- What do the following have in common?



- ... potentially many features in common:
 - Similar structure: states, actions, occasional rewards. We'll discuss a unified formal framework for many tasks like this (**MDPs**).
 - They're not directly supervised – nobody tells you *exactly* the right answer. We'll discuss how to learn tasks like this (**Reinforcement Learning**).

Formalizing tasks: MDPs

Markov Decision Processes (MDPs)



Agents & actions

Agent:

- At each time step t , perceives the **state**, s_t decides on an **action**, a_t from the set of actions available in that state, $A(s_t)$.
- E.g. press gas, brake, turn wheel left 0.57 radians, press gas + turn right 2.2 radians, shift to 4th gear, ...



Environments, states & transitions

Environment:

- Includes other cars (and also parts of self).
- Is in a state s_t .
- After the agent takes a_t , evolves to state $s_{t+1} \in S$ according to the **transition probabilities**: $p(s_{t+1}|s_t, a_t)$.
- **Markov**: transition probabilities depend *only* on s_t, a_t , not history.



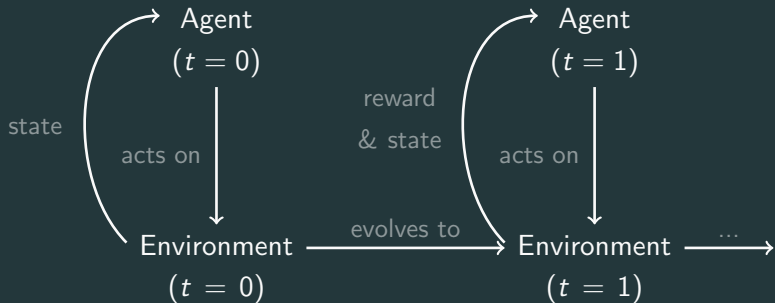
Time, & rewards

Rewards:

- Agent receives a **reward** $r_{t+1} \in R$ according to **reward probabilities**: $p(r_{t+1}|s_t, a_t, s_{t+1})$.
- E.g. fare for reaching a destination, penalty for hitting a pedestrian, ...
- **Return** is the sum of the **discounted** rewards over time: $\sum_{t=1}^{\infty} \gamma^t r_t$ for some $\gamma \in (0, 1]$.
- **Discount factor** γ tells how much we prioritize the present over the future.



Markov Decision Processes (MDPs)



Questions?

Learning in MDPs

Policies

- How does the agent decide what to do?
- By using a **policy** π which maps states to actions.
- This policy could take many forms: picking randomly, a set of rules, a table, a neural network, or some combination thereof.
- Ideally, you would want your policy to pick the best action in every state, but what does “best” mean?

Value functions

- A natural way to define “best” states is based on expected return (which we call **value**).

$$V^{\pi}(s) = \mathbb{E} [\text{Return} \mid s, \pi] = \mathbb{E} \left[\sum_{t=1}^{\infty} \gamma^t r_t \mid s, \pi \right]$$

- Expectation because this depends on the environment's transitions and rewards, which may be random.
- But this also depends on the policy! (That's why it's V^{π} .)

Optimality

- Now we can define the **best** policy as the one that gets the **best** expected return from every state.
- We'll denote it by π^* and the associated value function by V^* or V^{π^*} .
- Any problem that can be specified as a finite MDP has at least one optimal policy.
- But how can we try to find π^* or V^* ?

TD Learning and iteration

Chess

- You're playing chess against Magnus Carlsen. Let's say you estimate that you're doing pretty well, that is $V^\pi(s_t)$ is reasonably high.
- ... but then he makes a move you don't expect, and you realize you're doing worse than you thought, so $V^\pi(s_{t+1})$ is smaller.
- Can we learn from this difference?



TD Learning

- Temporal Difference (TD) learning is a formal framework for learning from surprises.
- For *any* value function, we should have that

$$V^\pi(s_t) = r_{t+1} + \gamma V^\pi(s_{t+1})$$

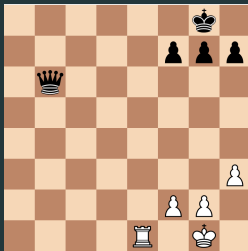
(This is often called the **Bellman Equation**.)

- So let's try to make this more true,

$$V^\pi(s_t) = V^\pi(s_t) + \alpha \underbrace{(r_{t+1} + \gamma V^\pi(s_{t+1}) - V(s_t))}_{\text{prediction error!}}, \quad \alpha \in [0, 1]$$

- Iterating this is guaranteed to converge to the true value function for a policy (assuming MDP is finite).
- Example: grid world.

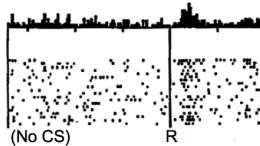
TD Learning (applied to chess)



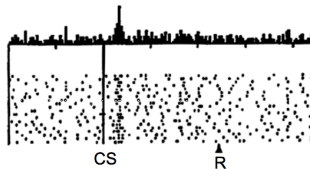
TD Learning (in the brain)

Do dopamine neurons report an error
in the prediction of reward?

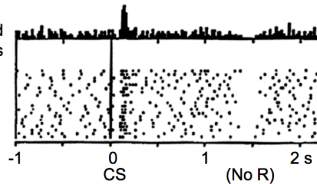
No prediction
Reward occurs



Reward predicted
Reward occurs



Reward predicted
No reward occurs



Actions

- But even if we have the optimal value function, how do we choose actions?
- In chess, it's easy – just look at the next position after you move, and figure out which one has the max value.
- But what about in more complicated situations, where we don't know how the environment will change after our actions?



Q-learning

Q-values

- The solution we'll explore incorporates the action into our values by estimating the *value of an action in a state*, which we'll denote by $Q(s, a)$:

$$Q^\pi(s, a) = \mathbb{E} [\text{Return} \mid s, \pi, a] = \mathbb{E} \left[\sum_{t=1}^{\infty} \gamma^t r_t \mid s, \pi, a \right]$$

- Notice that this contains the value function from before:

$$V^\pi(s) = \sum_{a \in A(s)} p(a|s, \pi) Q^\pi(s, a)$$

- But it also gives us ways of picking policies, e.g. pick the action with the highest Q .

Learning Q-values

- Using TD learning, we have another Bellman equation:

$$Q^\pi(s_t, a_t) = r_{t+1} + \gamma \max_{a'} Q^\pi(s_{t+1}, a')$$

- So let's try to make this more true,

$$Q^\pi(s_t, a_t) = Q^\pi(s_t, a_t) + \underbrace{\alpha \left(\left[r_{t+1} + \max_{a'} \gamma Q^\pi(s_{t+1}, a') \right] - Q(s_t, a_t) \right)}_{\text{prediction error!}}$$

- Almost surely converges to Q^* (and by extension π^*), as long as MDP is finite and each state, action pair is visited “enough.”
- Example: grid world.

Questions?

Wrapping up

- Audience participation!



- Are there potential problems with what we've learned so far?